

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

2nd Meeting, 2024 (Session 6), Wednesday 7
February 2024

**PE1979: Establish an independent inquiry
and an independent national whistleblowing
officer to investigate concerns about the
alleged mishandling of child safeguarding
enquiries by public bodies**

Petitioner	Neil McLennan, Christine Scott, Alison Dickie, and Bill Cook
Petition summary	Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to launch an independent inquiry to examine: concerns that allegations about child protection, child abuse, safeguarding, and children's rights have been mishandled by public bodies, including local authorities and the General Teaching Council Scotland (GTCS); gaps in the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry; and establish an independent national whistleblowing officer for Education and Children's Services in Scotland to handle these enquiries in the future.
Webpage	https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE1979

Introduction

1. The Committee last considered this petition at its meeting on [4 October 2023](#). At that meeting, the Committee agreed to invite the petitioners, and whistleblowers, to a roundtable discussion.
2. The Committee also delegated authority to the Convener to work with the clerks on the most appropriate format for the discussion. The Convener agreed, in the first instance, to invite the four named petitioners to participate in a public roundtable discussion.
3. The petition summary is included in **Annexe A** and the Official Report of the Committee's last consideration of this petition is at **Annexe B**.

4. Written submissions received prior to the Committee's last consideration can be found on the [petition's webpage](#).
5. Further background information about this petition can be found in the [SPICe briefing](#) for this petition.
6. The Scottish Government's initial position on this petition, provided by the then Minister for Children and Young People, can be found on the [petition's webpage](#).
7. Every petition collects signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing, 1,829 signatures have been received on this petition.

Today's meeting

8. At today's meeting, the Committee will be joined by –
 - Alison Dickie, Petitioner
 - Bill Cook, Petitioner
 - Neil McLennan, Petitioner
 - Brendan Barnett, Whistleblower

for a roundtable discussion on the action called for in the petition.

Action

The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take.

Clerk to the Committee

Annexe A

PE1979: Establish an independent inquiry and an independent national whistleblowing officer to investigate concerns about the alleged mishandling of child safeguarding enquiries by public bodies

Petitioner

Neil McLennan, Christine Scott, Alison Dickie, and Bill Cook

Date Lodged:

3 November 2022

Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to launch an independent inquiry to examine: concerns that allegations about child protection, child abuse, safeguarding, and children's rights have been mishandled by public bodies, including local authorities and the General Teaching Council Scotland (GTCS); gaps in the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry; and establish an independent national whistleblowing officer for Education and Children's Services in Scotland to handle these enquiries in the future.

Previous action

Have written to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills in July 2021 and received a response in August 2021. We are also aware that Oliver Mundell MSP and other MSPs have corresponded with the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills on this issue.

We support the #Unfeartie campaign, which was set up by the Children's Parliament in 2017.

Background information

The #Unfeartie pledge is to have courageous conversations regarding children's issues and speak up and stand alongside children. We take these principles very seriously, and have supported whistleblowers in raising historic and current allegations about child protection, child abuse, safeguarding and children's rights matters.

The alleged mishandling of child safeguarding concerns in many public bodies (Edinburgh, Borders, Aberdeenshire, East Lothian and the GTCS) have been well publicised, with whistleblowers calling for a public inquiry, open to existing or new whistleblowers and the public to raise recent or historic concerns.

A number of written and oral parliamentary questions highlighting these concerns have been lodged by MSPs. These include questions to the First Minister from Christine Grahame, Willie Rennie, Meghan Gallacher and Douglas Lumsden.

The Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry focuses on historic abuse and is specific to children in care. A wider inquiry into safeguarding concerns and enquiries from parents, guardians, carers, professionals and the public, which have been mishandled, is needed. This should consider gaps in the existing inquiry; mainstream and specialised settings; and regulated children's activities.

Annexe B

Extract from Official Report of last consideration of PE1979 on 4 October 2023

The Convener: Our next petition is PE1979, regarding the establishment of an independent inquiry and an independent national whistleblowing officer to investigate concerns about the alleged mishandling of child safeguarding inquiries by public bodies. The petition has been lodged by Neil McLennan, Christine Scott, Alison Dickie and Bill Cook. I see that the petitioners are with us in the public gallery. A warm welcome to you. You have had quite an extended morning before we got to your petition.

The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to launch an independent inquiry to examine concerns that allegations about child protection, child abuse, safeguarding and children's rights have been mishandled by public bodies, including local authorities and the General Teaching Council for Scotland, and concerns that there are gaps in the Scottish child abuse inquiry and to establish an independent national whistleblowing officer for education and children's services in Scotland to handle such inquiries.

We considered this petition at our meeting on 8 February, at which point we agreed to seek further information from a number of relevant organisations. We have subsequently received responses from the General Teaching Council for Scotland, the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland, the Scottish Social Services Council, the Educational Institute of Scotland and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. Copies of the responses are in the papers for today's meeting.

The GTCS has provided an overview of its fitness to teach process and identified national education reform and the Scottish child abuse inquiry as opportunities for driving improvement on the roles and responsibilities in child protection.

The responses from the Scottish Social Services Council, the EIS and COSLA suggest that the existing guidance and processes for child protection are sufficient, with both the EIS and the SSSC hesitant about the need for an independent national whistleblowing officer for education and children's services.

In contrast, the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland response notes that it has identified

“a number of gaps in the national guidance and a need for stronger accountability mechanisms.”

Its response suggests that there would be merit in exploring the creation of a national whistleblowing officer, perhaps in a similar format to the independent national whistleblowing officer for the national health service.

The committee has received three submissions from the petitioners that reflect on our previous consideration of the petition and comment on the content of responses that we have otherwise received.

Finally, members of the committee and I have received email correspondence from a number of individuals seeking to make submissions to the committee or to give evidence in support of the petition, but only if they can do so under conditions of confidentiality, which the committee can obviously agree to.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

Fergus Ewing: I will read back from the petitioners' response of 3 March:

"We thought it might be useful ... to take you through several actual case studies highlighted by whistleblowers and victims."

They also said that it was their hope that

"some whistleblowers will be prepared to speak directly to the committee".

These are very sensitive matters, as we know, so I suggest that it would be appropriate to invite the petitioners and whistleblowers to a round-table discussion on the issues raised by the petition. If that option is favoured, the committee might want to delegate authority to the convener to work with the clerks on the most appropriate format for that discussion to take place. We are here to make sure that people have a right to be heard. They have not been heard yet, so that would be a way in which we could give them that right.

The Convener: Colleagues, that might mean that you would be devolving to me the ability to agree that that session might be private in order to protect and respect the anonymity of those individuals who might feel that they want to contribute, and to work with the clerks to ensure that we can identify a format that the individuals who might want to contribute feel that they could support and feel confident in. Do members agree to keep the petition open and to next consider it at a round-table discussion where we will hear direct evidence, in a format that is to be agreed, from the people affected.

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: I hope that that meets the immediate hopes and expectations of the petitioners.